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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the cultural content practices of middle school teachers. A survey was mailed to 94 teachers and 5 intern teachers in one Southeastern United States urban school system; 71 percent responded. A survey with Likert-type scaled responses and qualitative questions was used. The public school system was selected due to its large student population and its socioeconomic and cultural diversity. Seventy-five percent of the teachers used the state curriculum framework and textbook programs to the exclusion of other resources in planning cultural inclusion. Reasons cited by the respondents indicated that the curriculum was required, that using it was necessary to keep their jobs, that state testing was based on the curriculum, and that limited availability of other materials and time constraints restricted choice of content. Several responses indicated personal second language knowledge as an influence on their cultural inclusion and/or teaching strategies. Curriculum constraints perceived by the teachers surveyed may be resulting in fewer cultures actually being taught. An expansion of professional development and certification requirements in the social sciences are needed to ensure adequate delivery of cultural content. (JLS)

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Middle School Multiculturalism: What is Being Taught and Why

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to examine the cultural content practices of middle school teachers. A survey was mailed to ninety-four teachers and five intern teachers in one Southeastern urban school system; 71% responded. Results concluded that respondents were (1) using the state curriculum framework and textbook programs to the exclusion of other resources in planning cultural inclusion, (2) stating a preference for generalized cultural teaching which may lead to an ethnocentric social studies curriculum, and (3) claiming an influence from foreign language acquisition on their cultural inclusion and/or teaching strategies.

The teaching of culture within social studies classrooms factors into children's understanding of other ideals and values (Banks 1992). Depending on the grade level of instruction, many different cultures may be chosen. The perspective given this culture, whether by inclusion or absence in the curriculum, may affect a child's world view. The level at which this decision is made can be crucial to the actual teaching of culture. National curriculum trends, state developed guidelines, and local interpretation of content and concepts may affect actual teaching of certain cultures. The focal questions of social science educators becomes *which* cultures will be chosen for curriculum inclusion, on what criteria were they chosen, and in what manner will they be taught.

This study examined teaching practices of middle school teachers and teaching interns in one urban public school system in the southern United States. A survey containing Likert-type scaled responses and qualitative questions was mailed to participants at their respective schools. Several areas were examined and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. This paper details primarily one area of research, cultural content in the middle grades, but also provides information regarding teaching strategies and decision-making for cultural inclusion.

Why the middle grades? Middle grades social studies has a range from world history to state history to American history. This creates flexibility and an opportunity for exploration of many different cultural subjects. Also, students are given participation in social science curricula on a regular basis in the middle grades rather than alternate day classes as is common in the elementary grades. According to the NCSS *Expectations of Excellence* (1994, 21), students in the middle grades

"begin to explore and ask questions about the nature of culture and specific aspects of culture, such as language and beliefs, and the influence of those aspects on human behavior."

The National Council for the Social Studies *Curriculum Standards* (1994), provides a curriculum design framework for restructuring social studies programs from Kindergarten through college. This document addresses, among other areas, student needs, expectations, and suggested instructional strategies

for achieving these goals. The document is divided into ten themes. Theme area one, culture, is characterized by descriptions of common characteristics among cultures, belief systems and influences, language interpretations, and cultural accommodations (1994, x). This theme could be used in any social studies classroom, methods course, or interdisciplinary teaching which would lend to student comprehension of culture. Given the range of this theme, and the *Curriculum Standards*, to what extent has this document been used for improving student comprehension in the area of culture? While literature regarding proposed cultures for teaching in public school systems have been thoroughly researched to date, little data has been collected about which specific cultures were being taught most often in social studies classrooms.

This public school system was chosen due to its large student population and the socio-economic and cultural diversity of individual schools within the system. The population of 94 teachers and 5 graduate teaching interns taught at least one social studies class per day on a regular basis. 83% of respondents taught social studies on a full-time basis. The years of experience for teachers ranged from one to 34. Teaching interns in the survey were in their second semester of full-time teaching. 66 teachers and 5 interns responded to the study. Of those respondents, 61% indicated gender as female and 39% as male. An overwhelming 96% of respondents indicated race as White, 2% as African-American, 1% as Asian, and 1% as Native American. The socio-economics of schools provided by participants indicated that at least 55% were considered middle class, 31% lower class, and 15% high class. Racially, 91% of the participants described their schools as having between 51 and 99% White population and 8% of schools had the same qualifier with an African-American population; 32% of responses claimed schools to have 21-50% African-American students.

Participants in the study were asked to provide the names of at least two cultures within certain geographic boundaries about which they currently taught (Table 1). Participants were also asked to provide up to ten names of cultures which they wanted to teach (Table 2). Cultures which would fit in the boundaries of European, Asian, Pacific Island, African, Middle Eastern and North African, South/Central American and Caribbean, Native American/Aleut, and others not listed were requested. As seen in the tables, names of countries, rather than

specific cultural or ethnic identifiers, were listed. Respondents qualified only the Maori, Aborigines, Native American and Central American tribes, Berbers, Pygmies, and the Zulu as cultural groups. Respondents also stated a preference for teaching about "general" European, Asian, African, and Native American cultures. These responses may indicate a misconception about the teaching of culture. In fact, geographic boundaries and migration patterns have effectively separated a national culture in many cases. These responses indicate that cultural and/or ethnic stereotypes may given to students during cultural studies rather than historically accurate depictions.

The middle grades teachers participating in this study appeared to be following the state social studies curriculum in presenting cultures to their classes. Respondents (75%) indicated that they did use the state social studies curriculum as a guide to teaching about culture. In fact, respondents in this study indicated that they followed the state social studies curriculum when making decisions about cultures. State curriculum suggesting cultures in some cases was followed, according to responses, because teachers believed it was necessary in order to hold their jobs. Some indicated that state testing would evaluate their teaching through a child's learning so they did not want to confuse state curriculum with other inclusions. Respondents also listed availability of materials, time restrictions, personal experience, and needs of the students as guiding choices of cultural content.

When asked to list influencing factors on choices of instructional strategies in teaching about different cultures, respondents often stated that the state curriculum framework and the textbook were the only sources consulted. Two responses to this question, while atypical for this study, may represent those failing to answer:

"At this school, instructional materials cost too much to invest in too heavily for technology for the individual classroom. So [it's] mainly handouts and VCR."

"There has been too much focus on multiculturalism. Too many textbooks attempt to bash Western culture and glorify all other cultures. I try to impart an appreciation of different cultures . . . but I also teach that America is a great country despite our mistakes of the past."

Several responses cited second language knowledge as a factor influencing multicultural teaching. Some of those comments were:

"I have studied German and Hebrew. . . A knowledge of these languages has helped me interpret several of the ideas held as values by these cultures."

My study of Russian and Eastern European languages has influenced my teaching in that a knowledge of the language gives me insights into how those cultures see the world."

"I understand the value of preserving language in order to preserve culture when faced with immersion into another culture."

"Language conveys much about cultural viewpoints and I try to use it in this manner."

"The influence of a growing minority (Spanish-speakers) and how its language is replacing English in some areas of the country. Example: South Florida."

This study indicates that middle grades teachers are delivering a variety of standardized cultural models to students. It is clear, though, that curriculum constraints perceived by these teachers may be resulting in fewer cultures actually being taught in the middle grades. It is unclear whether teachers properly regarded the curriculum framework as a suggested curriculum document containing concepts and themes for mastery of the social sciences. It seems likely teachers reasoned that any state document implied a curriculum mandate for which they would be held accountable. Given the results of this study, professional development and extended certification requirements within the social sciences are needed to ensure adequate delivery of cultural content. This expanded content should allow teachers to see beyond ethnocentric and stereotypical views as well as preparing them to seek materials about different cultures. Teachers should feel confident in locating materials and in developing local curriculum alignment to the state framework/national standards. This could be accomplished through content related coursework, personal experience,

and/or professional pursuits such as national conferences. Curriculum designers and evaluators must also prepare teachers for using different instructional strategies and cultural content. It may not be possible to include all existing cultures within a curriculum framework, but it is possible, through the use of national standards documents and others, to design a curriculum conducive to both learning and evaluation.

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Table 1: Most Frequently Noted Cultures Taught in Middle Grades

Country/Culture	1-5 actual responses	6-10 actual responses	11-15 actual responses	16 or more actual responses
England			X	
France			X	
Ancient Greece			X	
China				X
Japan				X
India		X		
Philippines		X		
Hawaii		X		
Maori	X			
Africa			X	
Egypt				X
Israel		X		
Mexico		X		
Cherokee Indians				X

Table 2: Most Frequently Desired Cultures for Teaching in Middle Grades

Country/Culture	1-5 actual responses	6-10 actual responses	11-15 actual responses	16 or more actual responses
General European			X	
China				X
Japan			X	
General Asian		X		
Australia		X		
African-American			X	
General African			X	
Arab		X		
General American/ Caribbean		X		
Canada		X		
Mexico		X		
General Native American			X	
Cherokee	X			